

What can you do?

Please see if you can help us with areas that are well-drained, sandy, lots of understory vegetation to eat, sunny places to bask and lay eggs with a balance of shade to compliment our environment we will be most happy! Ok, now that you have all of the particulars to help us in our survival; next time you see us you can appreciate how hard our lives really are!



The Future

It is known that many other species exist using the

tortoise burrows for shelter

and some live most or all of their lives in the burrows. If the tortoise disappears, what will happen to these other species, will they disappear too? This is why the gopher tortoise is called a **"keystone"** species. Scientific research shows that extinction of a "keystone" species results in significant changes to the ecosystem in which it occurs.

There are over 300 species that share the burrow of the tortoise. A few are the short-tailed snake, pine snake, indigo snake, gopher frog, fox, skunk, opossum, rabbit, quail, armadillo, burrowing owls, lizards, frogs, toads, and about 300 other commensal animals. The FI Mouse cannot exist without the gopher tortoise burrow.

Information obtained from:
www.gophertortoisecouncil.org
[www.saj.usace.army.mil](mailto:saj.usace.army.mil)
www.wld.fwc.state.fl.us
www.uga.edu/srellgopher.htm

St. Lucie Board of Co Commissioners

2300 Virginia Ave., Ft. Pierce, FL

Phone: 772-462-2526

Fax: 772-462-1684

Website: www.co.st-lucie.fl.us/erd

Threats

Dangers that threaten the survival of our species, of major concern is habitat destruction due to urbanization, construction of roads (road-kill), mining and careless use of herbicides and pesticides in addition to nature's predators.

Thanks for taking the time to get to know us!

Please take extra caution when you're planning your building projects. If you see one of our burrows anywhere on your site to be developed, contact your local

FL Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to get your permit or report our injury because they really can help!

Please remember, it is illegal to possess, study, move, relocate or handle us in any way without a permit!

Which can be obtained by contacting:
FL Fish & Wildlife Commission
561-625-5122

Gopher Tortoise



Federally protected as a "Species of Special Concern" by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

As a "keystone" species let us take you for a walk in their world and show you the importance of its' survival.

Environmental Resources Division



6120 Glades Cutoff Road
Ft. Pierce, FL 34981

Sponsor information

Terrific Tunnelers

Imagine that you must protect yourself from the elements, and to do so, you have to dig a tunnel in the ground that is as wide as your body, 15—30 feet long, and 6—10 feet deep at the end. (It doesn't usually excavate just one, but several). Not only is this activity vital to your protection, but many others depend on your tunneling ability for their shelter, food and growth. You can't even use machinery, not even a shovel. You do it with your bare hands. **Most of us would say, "forget it."**

But for the gopher tortoise, the tunneling is all in a day's work.



Reproduction

Tortoises usually mate during April and May. After mating, the female lays between three and fifteen eggs, either in a sandy mound in front of the burrow, or a nearby sunny place. The eggs hatch approximately 70 to 100 days later. The young spend much of their time in the mother's burrow until old enough to dig their own. **They don't reach reproductive maturity until they are between 10 and 15 years old, therefore, they cannot withstand any type of harvesting or collecting.**

History

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) belongs to a group of land tortoises that originated in western North America nearly 60 million years ago. At least 23 species of tortoises are known to have existed on our continent since that time, but only four (4) remain today. The ancestors of gopher tortoises migrated into the southeastern United States millions of years ago. Gopher tortoise averages 9-11 inches long, but can attain lengths of 15 inches. The limbs are very stout and strong, with wide flat claws. The front legs are protected with small scales and the shell is an outgrowth of the skeleton and is their major means of protection. They can weigh up to 15 pounds, but typically weigh about 8 to 10 pounds. Hatchlings are about 1.5—2 inches long and grow very slowly, less than 1 inch per year. Their shells are extremely soft for the first 3-5 years, and are thought to live in excess of 60 years.

Habitat

Areas that tortoises are usually found include xeric oak hammocks, scrub, pine flatwoods, dry prairies, and coastal dunes. They can also live in man-made environments, such as pastures, old fields and grassy roadsides. It must have well-drained sandy soils for digging, herbaceous food plants and open sunny areas for nesting and sunning themselves.

Eating Habits

Natural fires play an important role in maintaining its habitat by opening up the canopy and promoting growth of understory plants like wiregrass, saw palmetto, gopher apples, blackberries and other grasses and fruits. They will also spend time feeding in shallow freshwater wetlands or swales. Each tortoise occupies a specific area which is its' home range. A male may average 4.7 acres and a female will average 1.6 acres.

